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Vermont reaction muted to Bush proposal

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Reaction to President Bush's plan to put National Guard troops along the Mexican border to fight illegal immigration got a muted reception in Vermont, mostly because the proposal's specifics aren't available yet.

Vermont National Guard commander Maj. Gen. Michael Dubie will not comment on the proposal or how it might affect the state's guard personnel unless and until an order comes in from Washington, said his spokesman, Lt. Jeff Roosevelt. "We have no idea what role, if any we'll have in it," Roosevelt said.

Bush proposed sending thousands of National Guard troops to the Mexican border where they would boost patrols against illegal immigrants crossing the border into the United States. The deployment would last a year, and then the Guard would gradually leave as more U.S. Border Patrol agents take over, the president said in a televised speech Monday evening.

Martha Rainville, a former Vermont adjutant general and now a Republican candidate for Vermont's lone U.S. House seat, agreed with Bush. Rainville said the National Guard should be deployed along the Mexican border on a temporary basis until more Border Patrol agents are trained to do the job, Rainville spokesman Nathan Rice said.

Jim Dunn, a member of the Vermont State Guard's advisory committee, said a State or National Guard might work as a temporary fix along the Mexican border. The State Guard, not connected to the Vermont National Guard, is a descendent of the old Vermont Militia. The organization assists in activities such as shelter management and medical help during emergencies, Dunn said.

If the State Guard were ever to get involved in immigration control, it would probably be along the Canadian, not Mexican border, Dunn theorized.

Sen James Jeffords, I-Vt., said Monday night that he worried the National Guard doesn't have enough personnel to fulfill Bush's proposed mission. "With members of the National Guard already serving overseas in unprecedented numbers, and the hurricane season fast approaching, I am very concerned that President Bush's proposal may be spreading the Guard too thin," Jeffords said in a prepared statement.

Jeffords said Congress must pass immigration reform that strengthens border enforcement, establishes a temporary worker program and addresses the reality that millions of illegal immigrants are already in the United States.

Highlights -- BORDER PROBLEMS: President Bush said the United States does not have complete control of its borders and millions of people who have sneaked across the border have stayed in this country, living in the shadows of society.

-- NATIONAL GUARD: Bush said the federal government will pay for up to 6,000 National Guard

troops to be deployed to the southern border. They will serve in two-week rotations, meaning that over the course of a year a total of 156,000 troops could be involved. He said Guard units will not be involved in direct law enforcement activities; that duty will be performed by the Border Patrol. Guard units will work in support positions.

-- TEMPORARY WORKER PROGRAM: Bush called for a temporary worker program allowing foreign workers to enter the United States for jobs for a limited period of time. They would be required to return to their home countries at the conclusion of their stay.

EMPLOYERS: It is against the law to hire an illegal immigrant, and Bush said employers must be held to account for their employees. He said a tamper-proof identification card for every legal foreign worker would help with law enforcement and leave employers with no excuse for violating the law.

PATH TO CITIZENSHIP: Bush said it is not realistic to deport the millions of people illegally living in the United States. "I believe that illegal immigrants who have roots in our country and want to stay should have to pay a meaningful penalty for breaking the law, to pay their taxes, to learn English and to work in a job for a number of years. People who meet these conditions should be able to apply for citizenship but approval would not be automatic, and they will have to wait in line behind those who played by the rules and followed the law. What I have just described is not amnesty; it is a way for those who have broken the law to pay their debt to society and demonstrate the character that makes a good citizen."

-- ASSIMILATION:

Bush said that Americans "are bound together by our shared ideals, an appreciation of our history, respect for the flag we fly and an ability to speak and write the English language. English is also the key to unlocking the opportunity of America."

-- APPEAL TO CONGRESS:

Bush said he was speaking directly to members of the House and Senate in appealing for a comprehensive immigration bill. "All elements of this problem must be addressed together or none of them will be solved at all," he said. The House passed a law-and-order immigration bill that would erect fences along the Mexican border and treat people who sneak across borders as felons to be deported. The Senate began debate Monday on a broader bill.